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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issues that emerged in the first six months of a collaborative program initiated by the Massachusetts State Department of Education for simultaneously developing or improving middle school teacher preparation programs and restructuring middle schools. The literature on interorganizational collaboration provides a framework for exploring the processes that educators in the middle schools and the higher education institutions went through as they tried to establish relationships, define and accept common goals, and plan joint activities. The program started in 1990 and involved four teacher preparation institutions and six middle schools. Data for this report were collected through observation of participants at all-day institutes and through semi-structured interviews. This paper focuses on three sets of issues that emerged across all the sites: (1) partnership issues, including the tensions that arise when organizations try to work collaboratively with one another; (2) internal issues, including tensions that arise over priorities and other organizational dynamics; and (3) issues related to the Massachusetts State Department of Education, including tensions associated with the State's role in facilitating and organizing the project. (IAH)

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Getting Started:

Issues in Initiating New Models for School and University Collaboration

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Introduction

> I'm all for the collaboration project, but last month when we were sitting at the [middle school], they didn't have any idea who we were or why we were there. We didn't know them. The idea looks good on paper, but when it comes down to real people sitting in a room, God, there's a lot of work to do. I don't know if it's possible.
>
> -- University professor in the early stages of a school/university collaboration project

The rhetoric of the ongoing national discourse on school improvement has produced a clear set of beliefs: Reneving and improving schools, teaching, and teacher preparation cannot be done in isolation but will require schools and universities to forge new partnership paradigms (Goodlad, 1988; Holmes Group, 1990). Yet the reality is that, although there is a long history of interaction between schools and universities, including student teaching, in-service involvement of college faculty, and research, little of that history is characterized by the levels of equality and partnership needed today. This paper examines the issues that have emerged in the first six months of a collaborative program initiated by a state department of education (DOE) for simultaneously developing or improving middle school teacher preparation programs and restructuring middle schools.

The paper uses a framework provided by the literature of inter-organizational collaboration to focus on the processes the middle schools and colleges or universities have gone through as they have connected with one another, and have begun to define and accept common goals, and to think about planning joint activities.

Project summary

The project started in the spring of 1990 when three universities and five schools were asked by the state Department of Education (DOE) to participate in a collaborative project for improving middle school restructuring and developing or improving middle school teacher preparation. The DOE was seeking funding from a national foundation to provide schools and teacher preparation institutions with support and some limited funds (about $3-6000) for one year of collaborative planning. In addition, the DOE anticipated applying for second and third year implementation funding from the same foundation, which would provide support at a slightly higher level per year per school. The participants were told that if their partnership came up with a plan that was deemed workable, they had a good chance of continued funding. For a variety of reasons, one more school and one more teacher preparation institution (TPI)

were added before the participants were convened in late August. Although two TPIs are working with two schools each, after an initial informational meeting, they both have proceeded with independent partnerships with each school. Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, the program involves four teacher preparation institutions and six middle schools involved in six separate relationships.

In late August, the DOE convened meetings in several locales around the state to bring the partners together for the first time. Each institution was asked to bring a planning team to this meeting, to subsequent monthly planning meetings with their partners (usually attended by DOE staff), and to two all day institutes in late October and November. By May of 1991, partners interested in going forward with the grant will need to submit joint plans for implementation activities for DOE review.

Data Collection

Data for this report were collected through observation at the institute days held in the Fall of 1990 and through semi-structured interviews with one or two key figures from each of the collaborating institutions and from the Department of Education. A few of the interviews were conducted in December; most in late January.

Presentation format

To protect the confidentiality of people who are engaged in a on-going and delicate collaboration process, this report focuses on the issues that emerge across all the sites, not on the individual schools or institutions of higher education or on any individual relationships.

The paper is organized around three sets of interactions that form the context for the development of the collaborations. It highlights the issues in each area and identifies the tensions that needed to be (or in some cases, still need to be) resolved for smooth movement forward in the project. These areas are:

1- Partnership issues, including the tensions that arise when trying to work collaboratively with another organization

2- Internal issues, including tensions that arise internally as involvement with the collaboration project interacts with other priorities and other internal organizational dynamics

3- Issues with the Department of Education, including the tensions relating to the role the DOE has played in facilitating and organizing the project

These issues and tensions are presented in the context of a paper on a set of six relationships that, by and large, are succeeding, some more slowly than others, in moving toward a collaborative goal. The paper concludes with some suggestions from participants and a conclusion that uses the inter-organizational collaboration literature to frame the tasks that lie ahead for the partnerships.

1- Partnership issues, including the tensions that arise when trying to work collaboratively with another organization

Researchers and theorists who have studied inter-organizational collaboration have noted some pre-requisites to partnerships formation:

> It is necessary first of all for administrators to have a positive attitude towards inter-organizational coordination. Otherwise they will define their organizational problems in such a way that coordination does not appear to be a useful solution. Next, they must recognize an organizational need for coordination that is salient enough to justify absorbing the costs inherent in coordination. Once the need has been articulated then the search for potential coordination partners is initiated. After the pool of candidates has been assembled the members are evaluated in terms of their desirability and compatibility. Finally, after deciding to coordinate, the participating organizations must assess their capacity to adequately manage the on going coordination process. (Whetten, 1981: 14-16)

Because of the accelerated timetable and pre-arranged partnerships established by the DOE, partners have skipped or minimized each of these steps. Participants made the first two of Whetten's decisions quickly and casually. The schools were selected by the Department of Education largely because of their track record in other DOE school improvement grants. Universities were asked because of their proximity, background and/or interest in developing middle school teacher preparation programs. When asked, most agreed to participate, having a primary interest in the internal growth which might come about and with little understanding of exactly what the collaborative process would look like. One school leader recounts her understanding about the project back in June:

> Collaboration with the university was secondary. I understood the focus to be on internal change --discussing it, mapping it out... I knew that [teacher preparation institution] would be developing a team but I understood that we would be working in parallel. I pictured a process that, rather than move together step by step, we would work independently and tie in later. That kind of process seemed safe to me. I am very protective of the time and energy of my staff; I wouldn't have wanted to commit otherwise.

As the project unfolded, she realized that collaboration was as much on the agenda as restructuring and it seemed the Department was more interested in it. "They always come to the meetings with [teacher preparation institution], but know little about all the things that go on here in between. Collaboration gets more attention although restructuring is more important internally."

Similarly, the two steps related to establishing a pool and then choosing a partner were totally bypassed. These were all "arranged marriages" by the DOE; none of the partners had any significant working history; some had never heard of the other institution or did not know where each other was. There have been few overt complaints about the matches (and some praise for the DOE's choice) and no expressed desires to be out of the program. Instead, the consequence of bypassing these steps has shown up within the partnership dynamics. At various points, participants have looked across the table to examine the composition or size of their partner's team or how prepared they seemed to be for the meeting and wondered what level of commitment they signified. Most pairs are past those issues, but as partners have realized that the goals for the project will lead to a growing mutual interdependence, questions about what some call "quality control" have arisen. Comments like, "I thought they would be further along in their process" have been made by people on both "sides."

In four of the six relationships, participants have been sufficiently concern about the "readiness" or "commitment" of their partners to bring the subject up with the Department, not with their partners. In each case, the DOE has played an activist role in trying to resolve these problems, pressuring participants to increase or stabilize the composition of their teams or give some other evidence of being ready to proceed with the project.

Finally, Whetten's fifth step -- a thoughtful assessment of one's own institutional ability to commit to the partnership --not only did not happen before the start-up in most cases, but in some settings, the process is just beginning now.

Although the pace of the project has whipped them through or bypassed what Whetten sees as critical prerequisites to collaboration, and they are finding themselves re-examining some tough questions <u>as</u> they develop relationships, no institution has been willing, even under pressure, to withdraw from the program. All participants retain an extraordinarily high level of commitment and enthusiasm. Some are excited about the prospects of simultaneously

improving middle schools and teacher preparation; others see the project helping them moving their institutions in new directions; others simply express a dogged determination "not to be seen as the one who did not make it work." The commitment to staying in the program on all participants' part is so strong that, as the university professor quoted in the prologue notes:

> For better or worse, we are going to have some collaboration. Maybe I sound cynical in tone, but I will try like hell to make it work. Divorce is not an option here -- we have been given an opportunity.

Schermerhorn (1979: 31-2) cites nine steps of inter-organizational development including recognition and awareness of one another, establishment of mutual trust, common interest identification, recurring intra- and inter-organizational cost benefit analyses, and program implementation and institutionalization. Other theorists (Levine and White, 1961, for instance) view partnership development as a negotiation for what amounts to a resource exchange. Regardless of which perspective is used to describe the interaction of the developing partnership, in this project, the process has been rushed. Continuing the marriage/divorce metaphor used earlier, these are all marriages without courtships. In a courtship, two potential partners might share their visions of what a collaboration could look like and might even do some preliminary discussions about, for instance, what expectations each has of the other in a clinical training site. The vision sharing and the preliminary negotiations are different when they are played out in the context of already being in a committed relationship.

Furthermore, these negotiations have had to take place at the same time that partners are trying to understand how the other institution is organized, to make connections with appropriate counterparts, to develop trust, and to write a proposal for grant continuation --making for confusing, and sometimes stressful, start-ups. Many of the participants express frustration with the pace and the time-table which push them, as one put it, "to talk about our joint mission together when we haven't even had our first date." Others note that "we need to be people to one another" before moving forward on details of the project. Although several people comment on how helpful they found the structured activities and the role of DOE staff as facilitators, others talk about how their best progress in making the necessary personal connections has been made outside of, or even in spite of, regularly scheduled activities.

One principal notes that she can now, in January, define what she wishes

from her university partner and what her school can offer, but adds that that evolved only after a personal connection was made:

> In the beginning we spent a lot of time on goal setting and mission statement. Both [the TPI coordinator] and I were frustrated by that. Then in November, he came over for a conversation --just the two of us -- and we hit it off and we have been able to start to move to the specifics.

Despite having to simultaneously pursue these multiple agendas, most relationships have gotten to the point one might reasonably hope they would after six months: In most partnerships, each side has been able to be clear about what it has to offer to the joint enterprise and what it hopes its partner will bring. In general, schools are seen as offering "real world" sites for preparing teachers, as well as practical insights, sometimes into specific processes of middle school restructuring, to balance the theory of teacher preparation. In general teacher preparation institutions are seen as offering recent findings in educational research, sometimes with particular expertise in middle school issues, as well as professional development opportunities for existing faculty.

Still ahead for most pairs are the potentially sticky "turf" and quality control issues like whether the school has a say in selection and placement of the student teachers; or whether cooperating teachers need to be approved by the teacher preparation institution. In most cases, these kinds of issues have only recently been brought up and have yet to be resolved.

2- Internal issues, including tensions that arise internally as involvement with the collaboration project interacts with other priorities and other internal organizational dynamics

Inter-organizational theorists note that most organizations choose to collaborate to gain resources needed to meet the needs of internal innovation (Aiken and Hage, 1968; Pfeffer and Novak, 1976). Not surprisingly, the time demands of thoughtful collaborative planning in this project have had to compete with internal priorities of running a school or college or university. One principal summed it up: "When the crunch comes, our minds are on our internal issues and so are theirs -- so we don't always come as prepared [to joint planning meetings] as we should be." This competition for time and attention is made more fierce in all the institutions due to the constant cut-backs, lay-offs and reductions that characterize the current educational scene in the state. The real decline in resources, and the understaffing and the

deleterious affect on morale, have had serious impacts on the ability of some institutions to put together a planning team to work on what may be seen as an optional activity.

Institutions that are involved in serious internal upheaval and change have had a particularly hard time bringing attention and that most precious resource -- time -- to bear on collaboration issues. For instance, most of the principals see involvement in teacher preparation as separate from, and secondary to, the internal restructuring process they are overseeing. As one put it, "We haven't been able to mesh the two. It would be better if we did more on restructuring and then, after a year, worked more with [partner]."

In those schools further on the path to restructuring, administrators could see clearer connections between collaboration and teacher preparation and the improvement of the school. One principal characterized her ultimate goal as "developing an excellent middle school. But the way we will continue to be an excellent middle school is by working to help teachers get prepared."

In many cases, the top-down fashion in which the project started has inhibited the widespread involvement of the rest of the faculty and staff. Almost all the decisions to join the project were made quickly and unilaterally by principals, deans, or coordinators. In most cases, little was done to involve the rest of the staffs until late August, when teams had to be --often hastily -- put together for the meetings convened by the Department of Education. In some cases, August, a particularly difficult time of the year for school systems, was the first attempt at recruitment and it was hard: sometimes teachers or university faculty were indifferent, or unenthusiastic, or concerned about whether the pay-offs to their institution were worth the time investment. Although those hurdles have largely been overcome, these initial difficulties in pulling together a committed, knowledgeable team have contributed to some of the partnership concerns mentioned earlier, about "readiness" or "commitment." Furthermore, many leaders are only now thinking about how to get involvement in the project to radiate out from the teams, to include the rest of their staffs.

On a more positive note, many of these internal difficulties have been offset by the powerful sense of validation, especially in the schools, of being asked to participate. For middle school people in the process of a difficult organizational change, being asked to be in the project was a validation by outsiders of their progress and the importance of their worth. It was

described as a "shot in the arm" for the schools, as an "acknowledgment of our progress." Furthermore, because of the teacher preparation component, school people viewed it as a "legitimatization" of teachers and a valuing of what they know.

3- Issues with the Department of Education, including the tensions relating to the role the DOE has played in facilitating and organizing the project

What makes examination of this project particularly interesting is the role, or roles, played by the Department of Education in starting and supporting the venture. The Department has served as funding conduit, visionary, regulator and policy maker (regarding teacher preparation requirements), facilitator, intervener, and ultimately will be the evaluator of which partnerships might be permitted to continue. This has led to several conflicts. Some participants feel they cannot be totally forthright with Department staff. If they express a problem, they worry it may reduce their chances of going to stage II. Conversely, some report their fear that if they appear too enthusiastic about a particular collaborative activity they think they might do, it will get codified into regulation by the Department and they will have to do it. Many participants have valued the clear DOE vision of what a school college collaboration might look like but worry about how much theirs will have to resemble it. Similarly, some participants are concerned about the messages they are hearing on the future requirements for middle school teacher certification: "I hope they are sincere when they say there is not just one path to certification."

As a funding conduit, the Department has drawn criticism for late payments or for lower funding levels than anticipated. These are tempered by appreciation that the DOE has gotten the money to support these activities. The facilitator role played by the coordinator has been widely praised, for her help in "breaking the ice" between partners and as a knowledgeable resource on middle schools. Some have expressed concern that the coordinator is "spread too thin" to do as good a job as she might.

The DOE's multiple roles stand in sharpest relief when staff have intervened, as they have in all but two of the relationships, to address an institution's concern about the commitment or readiness of its partner. The Department has, for instance, pressured participants into providing a larger and more consistent planning team and required other institutions to show

evidence of readiness to go forward or risk being dropped from the program. Participants are mixed about the DOE role as facilitator and intervener. Some express praise and appreciation for their activist role, others comment that "The Department needs to be mindful of the fact that there are two entities in this collaboration and not three." Generally, participants who feel their relationships could be improved are more positive about the DOE's activist role.

Another consideration which affects the way the Department is seen is the very novelty of this kind of venture. Many of the participants report being substantially confused through much of the Fall about what was supposed to be happening and what specific expectations the Department or their partners had of them. In virtually all the relationships, at least one party described itself as having to play "catch-up," in trying to figure out what was going on. In January, 1991 the DOE put out a draft of the application for continuation into stage II of the project. It is very detailed and specific about roles, expectations, anticipated outcomes. Although some participants say the DOE has always been quite clear, several expressed sentiments like this one: "If the Department said then [in August] what it is saying now, I would have had a much clearer idea of what the project was all about."

A final consideration about the Department's role is the striking parallels between its own internal processes and what the schools and colleges are experiencing. Historically divided into units that worked with school improvement programs and those involved with certification of teacher preparation institutions, the project has required an unprecedented level of collaboration <u>within</u> the Department. Like the schools and the colleges, these units within the DOE have needed to learn about each other, sort out turf issues, create and disseminate a unified vision. Like the schools and colleges, they have had to do this on a hurried time table, short-handed in a time of diminishing resources, and with little precious little planning time. In this sense, the project can be seen as three-way simultaneous reneval, impacting as well on the way the Department of Education functions.

4- Recommendations, including suggestions from the participants and successful steps they have taken to improve their partnerships

Suggestions for improving the partnership-formation processes include figuring out creative ways to get to know each other and each other's schools. Some report success with joint field trips to look at other settings, noting that the greatest value of the trips has been getting to know one another better. Others recommend informal get-togethers of team members without the top echelons (e.g. deans, principals) present or without the DOE staff around. Other suggestions (not actually implemented) include formal team-building exercises and training along the Outward Bound model. One suggestion for which there was surprisingly strong support was that more time be allocated for meetings between partners, so that meetings could be more frequent than once a month, or longer and more intense than two hour sessions. Behind most of these suggestions were the feelings that the attention given to the collaboration by them (and their partners) was too fragmented and infrequent and that it was hard to sustain momentum between short monthly meetings. Some suggested meeting for several days running to build up some momentum, or using non-school days since leaving classes with substitutes was difficult. Most of these suggestions were couched with disclaimers like, "I'm not sure that this will be very popular, but..." but they all spoke to a need to improve the quality of the partnership and a willingness to think creatively about the time it might take to do that.

Careful team composition has been one of the approaches used to reduce some of the internal tensions and help the collaboration effort radiate into more of the participating institutions. By strategically overlapping members of the collaboration planning team with the other advisory and management committees of teachers, parents and administrators, one school has maximized coordination of these various efforts. Another has made the collaboration team a sub-committee of the larger school improvement team. While most schools have used internal publications to get information about the project out, one is setting out to consciously integrate more faculty and staff in the project through a series of workshops to be run with the collaborating teacher preparation institution. Teachers will sign up for mini-courses in a variety of areas. The agenda may be cooperative learning or inter-disciplinary approaches but the sub-text will be getting to know the partner and what it can offer.

Suggestions for the Department of Education when compiled, appear contradictory: the department should take a more active role but give participants more space to say what they want; should have a vision and hold to it, but don't impose it on participants; should be clearer about what they want but leave room for local choices. Part of this apparent contradiction stems from collating responses from participants with different histories and experiences, some with more successful partnerships than others. But some is probably inherent in the essentially complex task the Department has undertaken.

Conclusion

The Department of Education has played an activist role in this collaboration initiative and has, in effect, jump-started the whole process. This approach has bypassed steps inter-organizational theorists view as critical to relationship-building, and has made for a challenging six months as partners have scrambled to go through several stages simultaneously. On the other hand, it has also helped the institutions move fairly quickly to a point where most are excited about and ready to plan the next steps. Now that the early phase of the start-up is over, in looking ahead, the Department and participants might benefit by considering some lessons from the literature on the later stages of inter-organizational collaboration. It is useful to bear in mind that collaborations between institutions with different goals, internal structures, environmental pressures and time constraints can be problematic (Schermerhorn, 1981; Halpert, 1982) and partners will need to continue to overcome the external and internal obstacles associated with them. Specifically:

--As the partners increase their mutual interdependence and begin to plan and implement truly collaborative components, they are likely to encounter more questions about "turf" and "quality control." Rogers and Whetten, 1982). For the relationships to grow and improve, it will become even more important to foster independent "people to people" relationships that can openly and honestly deal with potential sticky issues, without continuing to rely on the Department as intermediary.

--Evan (1972) points out the importance of making and sustaining contact with the appropriate counterparts in the other organization. This will grow in importance for project participants as they move to formalize and institutionalize their collaborative efforts.

--Collaborative projects that flourish as small projects on the fringes of organizations often encounter difficulties when they are institutionalized and brought closer to the core of what each institution views as its central

mission (Gold and Charner 1986). As these partnerships progress, it becomes increasingly important to encourage partners to develop a mechanism and a process to have involvement in the project radiate beyond the team, to create the possibility for real institutional change. This is especially important at the higher education level.

The literature on inter-organizational collaboration provides a useful framework to understand what has gone on in these partnerships. It can also serve to illuminate the important steps that are yet to come and the support the participants will need as they go forward turning the rhetoric of educational reform and simultaneous reneval into a reality.

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